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Physician disputes Woodward account

By Bill Gertz
 THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Bob Woodward's claimed deathbed interview of William Casey was medically impossible, a physician familiar with facts of the CIA director's condition told The Washington Times yesterday.

Mr. Casey suffered from a severe speech disorder and was unable to hear or speak when Mr. Woodward reports he questioned the late CIA chief about his role in the Iran-Contra affair, the physician said.

Mr. Woodward, an assistant managing editor of The Washington Post, claimed in a new book that Mr. Casey granted him a deathbed interview and nodded in affirmation when asked, "You knew ... didn't you?" that proceeds from the sale of U.S. weapons to Iran had been diverted to the Nicaraguan resistance.

In an interview with CBS-TV's "60 Minutes" on Sunday evening, Mr. Woodward further detailed his alleged conversation with Mr. Casey.

"He was dying. It was not the Casey I knew physically," Mr. Woodward told CBS. "And so I got one question, and ... that question was: 'You knew about the diversion, didn't you?' ... And he nodded. ... And I said 'Why?' And he said, 'I believed.'"

However, the physician, who spoke on condition of anonymity, charged that Mr. Woodward's account of the hospital meeting was "medically impossible."

"He [Mr. Casey] couldn't have understood the question," the physician said.

Mr. Casey suffered a brain seizure Dec. 15 and underwent surgery to remove a large brain tumor three days later. He died May 6.

After surgery involving the frontal lobe of his brain, Mr. Casey suffered from a form of "dysphasia," that left him paralyzed on the right side of his body and able to understand speech, but unable to reply, the source said.

However, through the month of January Mr. Casey's condition gradually worsened into a severe form of "aphasia," that left him unable to understand or reply to questions, the physician said.

By late January, after which Mr.

Woodward said he interviewed Mr. Casey, "he was profoundly paralyzed and he could only be heard by putting your ear to his lips," the source said. "From a medical standpoint, none of this holds water. Mr. Woodward is asking us to believe something that is medically unfeasible; it's just not possible."

At the time Mr. Casey's resignation was announced in late January, Attorney General Edwin Meese III and then-White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan visited Mr. Casey at the hospital, but were unable to talk with him about the resignation letter because of his condition, the source said.

Mr. Woodward wrote in his book that his hospital interview took place several weeks after Mr. Casey's surgery. He told CBS' "60 Minutes" Sunday that with the help of a "source" at Georgetown University Hospital, he slipped past security guards posted at Mr. Casey's room at Georgetown University Hospital and held the alleged conversation.

Mr. Casey's widow, Sophia Casey, has vehemently denied that Mr. Woodward talked with her husband on his deathbed and told reporters: "He's lying about that."

ABC News reported last night that government and congressional officials suspect Mr. Woodward secretly entered Mr. Casey's hospital room escorted by a CIA official.

Mr. Woodward could not be reached for comment. But he was quoted yesterday by The Post as saying, "I stand by everything in the book, including the visit I made to Casey's hospital room when I talked to him as described."

Mr. Woodward also said that Deputy CIA Director Robert Gates "has said many times to many people that he had conversations with Casey — two of them during this period [while Casey was in the hospital]."

High-ranking administration intelligence sources said CIA guards blocked Mr. Woodward from entering Mr. Casey's room Jan. 22, and that after that time the CIA director was unable to communicate because of the illness.

Dr. Michael Salzman, a neurosurgeon with the University of Maryland Hospital in Baltimore, described aphasia as a "severe language disorder" that comes in many forms.

"It's very, very complicated," he said in an interview.

Receptive aphasia is a condition where a person is unable to receive and understand speech, and expressive aphasia is when a person can understand speech, but is unable to construct sentences in reply.

"But a person's inability to produce speech doesn't mean he can't communicate in other ways, like nodding," Dr. Salzman said.

Meanwhile, administration officials and several members of Congress voiced concern about the negative effect Mr. Woodward's reports could have on the U.S. intelligence community's relations with Congress and foreign spy services.

At the White House, press spokesman Marlin Fitzwater declined to comment on Mr. Woodward's intelligence revelations.

Mr. Fitzwater added: "It's Ben Bradlee's job to publicize this book, not me."

Asked whether Mr. Woodward met Mr. Casey for a final interview in the hospital, Mr. Fitzwater said, "Mrs. Casey has spoken out on this rather eloquently."

CIA spokesman William Baker also declined to comment on the substance of Mr. Woodward's book. But Mr. Baker said the allegations made in published accounts were damaging to U.S. intelligence agencies.

"Anytime a book like this makes a number of revelations, it makes it difficult for us in the intelligence community to do our job," he said.

So far, there has been no damaging reaction that has affected U.S. intelligence activities as a result of Mr. Woodward's allegations, Mr. Baker said.

"Our concern is with our credibility with Congress and our liaison" with foreign intelligence services, he said.

Rep. Henry Hyde, Illinois Republican and ranking member of the House Intelligence Committee,

Date **29 Sept '87**

Page

Continued

called Mr. Woodward's expose "a very dangerous book."

"It endangers our entire intelligence service," he said, calling it a "disservice" to the country.

"It just seems to me that a lot of information was unwisely made public," Mr. Hyde said. "It embarrasses us whether it's true or false and it certainly helps our adversaries."

Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman David Boren, Oklahoma Democrat, said he would not comment on specific allegations in Mr. Woodward's book. But the oversight panel chairman said the committee was "taking the steps to ensure appropriate accountability" of the CIA.

The Senate panel has established new procedures governing covert operations, he said, adding, "We have greatly increased control of budgeting procedures."

Sen. Armed Services Committee Chairman Sam Nunn, Georgia Democrat, said he was concerned about the security problems of a CIA director meeting frequently with a veteran investigative reporter. Mr. Woodward claims to have met Mr. Casey 48 times.

"When the head of the Central Intelligence Agency, if indeed that is correct, meets with an investigative reporter of Bob Woodward's skill and reputation 48 times, or anything resembling that, then I think that in itself is very questionable and I think it's very surprising," Mr. Nunn told reporters.

CIA records indicate there were "far fewer" than the 48 contacts Mr. Woodward said he held privately and publicly with the CIA chief, a CIA spokesman said.

In a related matter, Dr. Daniel Ruge, President Reagan's former physician, also disputed a claim in Mr. Woodward's book that the president was disoriented as a result of a bullet wound he received in a 1981 assassination attempt.

"It's not true," Dr. Ruge told The Associate Press from his Denver home. "I think his recovery was superb."

"I never saw anything like that [description in the book]... It's certainly news to me and I was there most of the time."



Sophia Casey (right), with her daughter, Bernadette, calls Bob Woodward's story about her late husband, William Casey, "absolute blasphemy." AP